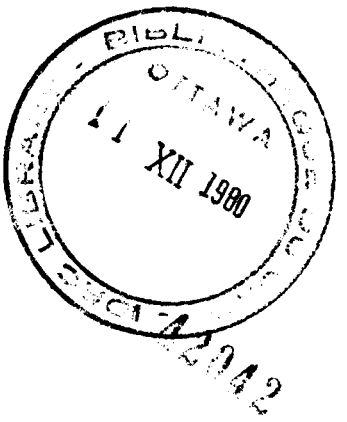

NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONS: BEYOND DIALOGUE

Notes for talk

at

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As the sounds of war grow louder in West Asia, and a sense of conflict deepens in North America, one is tempted to ask oneself whether this is the appropriate time to talk about or even think about redefining the relationship between the advantaged countries of the North and the disadvantaged ones of the South. One must also ask oneself, however, whether there is ever an "absolutely correct" time for change. The 300-plus "small wars" that have been fought after champagne bottles were emptied on VE Day; the border disputes that have disrupted relations between countries that should actually be working together for their mutual benefit; the polarization of political and social forces in North America; the increasing militancy of native peoples seeking restitution of lost rights; and even the contractual disputes which threaten to bring public administration in Canada to a halt... these are all among the discontinuities and discontents which are a part of the human story. They should not deter us – as similar situations did not deter some of our predecessors in life – from seeking to isolate and strengthen the positive, or potentially positive, aspects of human history. Doomsday is always around the corner. Our concern must be to ensure that we never slew into that bend.

In that spirit, I welcome and applaud your exertions as, indeed, I do all exertions aimed at improving mutual understanding between the North and the South. I was delighted earlier this year, for instance, when the big media houses of the world focussed their attention on North-South relations. From the London Times to the Times of India, from CBS to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, column space and air waves were opened to comments and reports on international interdependence. Even Time magazine lifted its bombazine skirts and did a verbal Charleston on behalf of the world's poor. The occasion for all this media attention was the publication

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of the "Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues" better known in global shorthand as the Brandt Commission Report. The world's academics understood the importance of the document before many politicians did, and the BCR was soon being studied at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels. It is now required reading, for instance, as part of Carleton University's course 47260. This is all very good, but my question is: "Is it enough?" Are we to be satisfied with welcoming the BCR as a necessary, erudite, and perceptive contribution to the North-South dialogue, and leave it at that? Or can we use the Report as a new starting point from which to move beyond dialogue?

A media pundit in New York has said that there is no North South dialogue, only a parallel set of monologues. I disagree. The fact that there is disagreement does not imply a lack of dialogue. The dialogue which began under the force of oil power in the early 1970s has continued in various fora. It has slowed down or quickened from time to time, and has been afflicted by concerns, not all of them valid, but it has continued in both verbal and written form. In fact, the literature on North-South relations is now so voluminous that it is a potential environmental threat: forests have to be denuded to provide the paper on which books on the subject are printed, or to manufacture shelving on which these books are stored. No formula has yet been found to determine the exact level of air pollution caused by the politicians who exude heat and sound rather than shed light, on the subject.

The BCR does light, as the Pearson Report did earlier. The BCR seeks urgent action in such areas as emergency relief for the poorest countries, food security, a balance between population and resources, commodity trade, industrialization and new patterns of

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industrial trade, energy, disarmament and development, transfers of resources, and the management of development, including development finance. Many of these issues exercised the Pearson Commission as well. Some of them have been raised elsewhere, as the BCR itself points out. T. S. Eliot said that "true originality is merely development" and if one accepts that definition, the Brandt Commission is not to be faulted for refocussing attention on these issues in a very special way. The theme of the BCR is survival in mutuality. In that respect, it has made a unique contribution to the North-South dialogue in that a group of eminent persons, nine (9) of whom were from the advantaged countries of the North, have unanimously accepted the theme of mutual interest, and have added the thews and sinews of programs and proposals to the conceptual skeleton of interdependence.

Nevertheless, for all the attention it has received and the hopes it has raised, the BCR, which was mentioned over 317 times during the 11th Special Session of the UN General Assembly, did not enable that session to move beyond dialogue. Three reservations (by the Federal Republic of Germany, the UK, and the US) distorted the consensus on a timetable and framework for global negotiations on international economic Cooperation. Similarly, the consensus text on an international development strategy could come unstuck as a result of differing interpretations made by several countries after consensus was reached. Both issues are now with the regular session of the UN General Assembly where, undoubtedly, dialogue will continue. What then?

The world is often told that theNorth-South dialogue relationship does not proceed beyond dialogue because countries of the South have formed a redoubt behind inflexible negotiating positions;

and that their most-used weapon is rhetoric. The latter is a much misused word, of course, and I personally cannot accept condemnation of what our Greek and Sanskrit-speaking forebears considered the highest form of skill in discourse; in other words, part of the art of dialogue. And if one assumes that the Group of 77 extends dialogue by talking interminably and intractably, there is another side to that coin, too.

In his "Requiem for the North-South Conference", the 18-month cycle of talks in Paris co-chaired by Canada and Venezuela, Dr. Jahangir Amuzagar quotes an American source as describing the Northern strategy at CIEC sessions as one that was carefully set in place "to talk them (ie the South) to death". Patrick Daniel Moynihan, that visceral chronicler of international politics, says that during the previous special session of the UN General Assembly, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had two objectives: "first, to keep the North united; second, to divide the South." Depending on the tenacity of their foreign policy bureaucracies, and the skill of their now-limousined diplomatic footsoldiers, countries of the North can continue to participate in North-South dialogue, while pursuing the same objectives. But it will be a dialogue without end, a case of SAMSARA or "eternity" in words.

I am not arguing that the South is blameless in this matter. Many slogan-bearers of the New International Economic Order, and their zeal abroad masks their incapacity at home. Many Southern representatives have allowed a negotiation to get beyond the point of no return because they have failed to discern those signs which indicate that a deal can be closed. Foreign Ministers of Small States frequently learn on the job, alas. Some Southern representatives, while seeing a possible corelation between political

and economical goals, unduly emphasize the former at the expense of the latter. Having said that, however, one has to point out as well that there is a certain logic to the militancy of the South. That logic has to be understood and appreciated before North-South relations go beyond dialogue. Gamal Abdel Nasser once said that all post-colonial societies go through two revolutions: a political revolution designed to establish political autarchy, and an economic revolution through which the benefits of political self-sufficiency are secured for the people. One can argue about the use of the word revolution, but the thrust of Nasser's assessment is clear. The political changes which brought a virtual end to the colonial era were part of a process that will be completed only when it encompasses economic betterment and social justice – "greater human dignity, security, justice and equity", as the BCR defines it. And just as the political component of the process had both a domestic and international dimension, so does the economic.

The States of South Asia, which were among the pioneers of decolonization, were the home of freedom movements which initially, were domestically-oriented. The pattern of colonial administration effectively thwarted lateral cooperation and communication among colonial territories. In South Asia, therefore, the first freedom movements derived their motivation and drew their strength from domestic compulsions and domestic sources. But as these South Asian states re-emerged into independence, they looked outwards, seeking to offer their experience and lend their support to freedom movements elsewhere. This was particularly true of India, where Nehru felt a certain charismatic urge to lead oppressed and disadvantaged peoples. As Rabindranath Tagore put it much earlier: "...India, in spite of her penury and humiliation, can afford to come to the rescue of humanity." In this spirit, Nehru's India set the stage for

systematizing the external dimension of political change with the summoning, in January 1949, of an Asian Conference to protest, and coordinate action against the so-called "police action" by Holland, against Indonesian nationalists. That was a milestone from which there was no turning back, although one hears much more of perhaps a more memorable milestone, the Bandung Conference of 1955. Thereafter, the concept of anti-colonial solidarity was given form and substance, with a variety of strategies used internationally to underpin domestic programs for regaining freedom from colonial rule. This was particularly so at the UN where the newly-emerging states, who were the beneficiaries of decolonization, gave decolonization a new momentum. What is happening in the area of international economic negotiation is very much continuation of that process.

Curiously, it was President Tito rather than the leader of a post-colonial state, who nudged the disadvantaged countries in this direction. Tito assured the first non-aligned summit held at Belgrade in 1961, that in the years to come the North-South imbalance would be at least as critical a factor in international relations as the East-West relationship. He urged greater attention to economic matters and, although his views were poorly received at the time, he persevered. He dragged his colleagues almost screaming to the Cairo conference on international economic disparities in 1962. The pressures which built up from that conference resulted in the first UN Conference on Trade and Development or UNCTAD I in 1964, where G77, now numbering 119, was born. That was another milestone from which Southern countries cannot pull back. From that point onwards, G77 has used every conceivable occasion to push forward the process of internationalising what is fundamentally a domestic concern. Thus, the struggle for

human dignity, the struggle for economic justice, is being conducted with the same singlemindedness and sense of commitment that characterized the quest for political justice through decolonization.

The South is at a major tactical disadvantage in this phase of the process. The campaigns for political freedom were waged, primarily on what were then colonial territories. International diplomacy and negotiation could, in that situation, complement direct action ranging from satyagraha or non-violent protest as in India, through acts of anti-colonial harrassment as in Kenya, to actual war. No such complementarity is possible today, and substitute tactics must be found. Hence, on many occasions, the stridence and stubbornness of Southern spokesmen at international fora. Hence, too, continued Southern support for OPEC, based on the attraction of commodity clout, despite the fact that escalating oil prices have hit countries of the south hard. And hence, the persistent emphasis on keeping ranks closed and, in doing so, to treat the gamut of international economic disparities as a single package, although fractionalising issues could well be a more realistic approach leading to quick and achievable agreement in some areas.

This is the logic that, I submit, has to be understood if the North-South relationship is to progress beyond dialogue.

Now. One must pose the questions: "Is it necessary to progress beyond dialogue? Will not the world go on if the North concentrates on "talking the South to death?" The BCR argues cogently and convincingly that it <u>does</u> matter, by demon-

strating that interdependence is a fact, not a pity slogan. There was a time when economic trends in the North were decisive in influencing trends across the South, with no reciprocal movement. Not now. It has been somewhat facetiously said, for instance, that when Sadham Hussein and Khomeini sneeze at each other, across the Shart-al-Arab waterway, the Establishments in Western Europe and North America develop incipient symptoms of viral pneumonia. But seriously, when it can be demonstrated, for instance, that "one job in twenty in the US is in production for export to the Third World", the dangers to the North of not proceeding beyond dialogue become self-evident.

Let us look at it from another perspective. I have said that the international positions taken by Southern representatives at negotiating fora are a reflection of domestic pressures and imperatives. Some governments attempt to dampen these pressures by force and authoritarian rule; others by pumping doctrinaire ideology instead of resources into their economies; still others by mortgaging the destinies of generations yet unborn to foreign providers of sustenance. These are all holding operations. If international economic inequities persist, if North and South do not move beyond dialogue, and the disadvantages under which the South labours therefore worsen to breaking point, it will no longer be possible to hold back the pressures. The resulting turmoil and turbulence will spill over and across national boundaries, producing a condition of anarchy whose dimensions cannot be calculated beforehand. Negotiators can be "talked to death". Deprived and disadvantaged humanity in the mass, cannot.